

## **THE INFLUENCES OF INFLIGHT LEADERS' LEADERSHIP STYLES ON JUNIOR FLIGHT ATTENDANTS' EMOTIONS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Flight attendants, especially the juniors, are constantly working under demanding working environments. Their emotions during flight times will affect directly their work performances as well as the satisfaction level of passengers. According to Cohen et al. (1995), leadership styles have a great impact on their subordinates' emotion at work. Bearing this in mind, this study intended to investigate the relationship between inflight leaders' leadership styles and their junior flight attendants' emotions. As such, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 7 junior flight attendants of Cathay Pacific Airways. It was noted that three types of leadership styles namely informing, authoritarian and consulting were the most commonly found which had great influences either positively or negatively on their junior flight attendants' emotions. Negative emotion such as feeling speechless, distant, unset, being ignored, nervous, depressed, drained, unfair, disappointed, confused, panic, scared, frustrated and downcast were reported; while some positive emotions such as feeling respected, great and impressed were found. In summary, the study recommended that airlines should create respectful relationship and two-way communication between the inflight leaders and junior flight attendants.

**KEYWORDS:** Flight Attendant, Leadership, Leadership style, Emotion

### **INTRODUCTION**

Airlines nowadays rely a lot on their flight attendants to enhance inflight services and retain passengers' loyalties (Chang & Chiu, 2009; Karatepe & Vatankhah, 2014). Nonetheless, managing human capital is a challenging task due to the difficulties of managing employees' work emotions (Bagri et al., 2011). Flight attendants are expected to suffer from a high level of stress in the aircrafts, which can affect their emotions by driving them to experience emotional dissonances (Chen & Kao, 2012). The role of inflight leaders are therefore essential to take care of the junior flight attendants' inflight emotions. However, it is also reminded that leadership style is another factor to influence subordinates' emotions and feelings (Certo & Certo, 2006; Kafetsios et al., 2014). The topic of leadership style has been deeply studied over the past decades. Despite high recognition, there seems to be a lack of investigation on the relationship between leadership styles and subordinates' emotions. This study purposely examined different inflight leaders' leadership styles and their impacts on the junior flight attendants' emotions. Finding out such impact is important because it should not be neglected as the junior flight attendants' emotions will highly affect their working performances thus dictate a success or failure towards the airlines' strategic goals (Bar-On & Parker, 2000; Ogbeide, 2011; Robertson & Cooper, 2011; Taylor, 2010; Zeidner et al., 2009).

## Leadership Style

Leadership style involves traits, skills, behaviors that the leaders use to interact with their subordinates, and demonstrates the manners that they behave (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Lussier & Achua, 2010). The importance of leadership styles in its relationship with subordinates' working performance and organizational production have been largely studied (Day & Antonakis, 2012; Dess et al., 2014; Özsahin, et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the researches focusing on the relationship between leadership styles and the subordinates' emotions are relatively limited (Lee et al., 2011). Under the 'customer-focused' philosophy, airlines often need to 'tailor-make' their inflight services for the benefits of passengers (Aksoy et al., 2003; Suki, 2014). Inflight leaders are the one who undertake the task of 'tailor-make' services, and at the same time, they need to make decisions and deliver the decisions to junior flight attendants. 'Leadership Continuum of Tannenbaum and Schmidt' was chosen to classify inflight leaders' leadership styles in this study. Distinguishing leadership styles according to the leaders' decision-making behaviors, 'Leadership Continuum of Tannenbaum and Schmidt' was initially developed by Tannenbaum and Schmidt (1973) named as 'Continuum of leadership behavior' and further introduced by Lumpé (2008).

## Emotion

Emotions make people to provide immediate reactions to certain conditions that they face (Manstead et al., 2003). These reactions are some kinds of communications to the others, through the individuals' gestures, postures, facial expressions and verbalizations, and able to maintain positive relationships or create conflicts, and impact the way people feel (Oatley & Johnson-Laird, 2014; Pestonjee & Pandey, 2013). Largely because of work stresses and different human behaviors, people often generate and obtain emotions especially in the workplaces (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Lord et al., 2002; Neff, 1985; Sieben & Wettergren, 2010; Wainwright & Calnan, 2002). In the past, people may only view emotion as one's behavior or personality. Yet nowadays the nature of airline industry has led the management to view emotion as the invisible and intangible asset of their employees (Hartel et al., 2005). The front-line working environments are full of emotional dissonances. Under the global concept of 'quality- and customer-orientation', the emotions of front-line employees, (i.e. flight attendants) are expected to be touched off while facing difficult situations and dealing with demanding or potentially aggressive passengers (Chen & Kao, 2011; Pinar-Chelso & Castro, 2012). Undoubtedly, these kinds of external factors do create emotional effects on the employees. Nonetheless, it should be noted that these employees may also suffer emotional exhaustions due to the internal factors, which may refer to their inflight leaders' leadership styles (Gardner et al., 2009; Ng et al., 2011; William, 2003).

## METHODOLOGY

The study adopted qualitative approach and in-depth semi-structured interviews. The target population was the junior flight attendant of all airlines while the target samples were the junior flight attendants in the lowest job ranking position of Cabin Crew Team in Cathay Pacific Airways. All samples were in the most junior job position in the Cabin Crew Team of Cathay Pacific Airways and had at least 2 years of flying experiences. 10 junior flight attendants were purposely invited to conduct an interview as they had shared with the researcher that they had experienced some favorable and unfavorable emotional matters in relation to their inflight leaders' leadership styles. This was considered as a purposive sampling approach as the experiences of the selected samples were comprised of a group of people based on a particular attribute and reflected a common phenomenon of study interests (Richards & Morse, 2007; Vanderstoep & Johnston,

2009). 7 junior flight attendants had agreed to be the samples in final and were thus invited to participate in individual interviews.

At the beginning of each interview, the interviewees were invited to choose specific leadership style(s) from the 'Leadership Continuum of Tannenbaum and Schmidt'. The interviews' discussions and sharing were based on the interviewees' selection of particular leadership style(s). However, they were beforehand asked to review the descriptions of specific leadership styles in details, and then recalled their previous inflight leaders' decision-making behaviors aligning with the descriptions. After the interviewees indicated the particular leadership style(s) in the 'Leadership Continuum of Tannenbaum and Schmidt' in relation to their recalled inflight leaders, they were afterwards encouraged to share their previous inflight experiences and provide relevant examples. Their sharing was guided by the following interview **Questions**

- How did your previous inflight leaders make decisions?
- What were the characteristics of their decision-making styles?
- During the flight, how did you feel when you work with these leader(s)?
- What kinds of incidents made you feel that ways?

The researcher did not take side regarding the specific type of leadership style while conducting the interviews, but only played a role in leading the interview respondents to share their observations and experiences. Notes had been taken and Cantonese was used. After the interviews, the taken notes were then systematically transcribed into written formats and translated into English for analysis. All interviews were conducted at the end of July, 2014. Each of the interviews lasted for half an hour approximately. It was later on found that the information collected from some interviewees was not comprehensive, and there were lack of supportive evidences. Therefore, follow-up telephone calls were conducted and finished by the end of August, 2014.

Inductive analysis approach was adopted, which involved the investigations on the relationship between the two human subjects' relationship (Anderson, 2009; Patton, 2002). Under inductive analysis approach, thematic coding and template analysis techniques were used. Thematic coding is one form of qualitative inductive analyses which involves identifying passages of text that are linked by a common case and allows the researchers to index the text into categories for analysis (Gibbs, 2007; Flick, 2014; Flick et al., 2004). Template analysis is one of the thematic coding forms. Through the development of coding template, template analysis helps to summarize the identified important themes and categories in a data set, and organized them in a meaningful and useful way (Miles et al., 2014; University of Huddersfield, 2014). The data gathered from the in-depth semi-structured interviews were categorized into categories within the template for data analysis. After the follow-up telephone interviews, the initial coding had also been reviewed to ensure the consistency. Member checks were also done at the end of September, 2014, in order to verify the findings and assure their validity, by asking feedbacks from the interviewees regarding the interviewer's findings in the study (Butler-Kisber, 2010; Schwandt, 2007).

## **Findings**

The interviewees mentioned they would attend briefings before the flights. During the briefings, the inflight service manager, senior purser and pursers would talk about their decisions regarding the ways of conducting inflight

services. These inflight leaders' decision-making behaviors would initially be revealed, and their actual working styles would continuously demonstrate their decision-making behaviors in the aircrafts. It was found that the majority of interviewees said they had worked with informing and consulting inflight leaders, while few of them recalled experiences in which they worked under the authoritarian inflight leaders. Positive and negative emotion effects were also revealed from the interviews conducted with the 7 junior flight attendants.

Informing inflight leaders would directly inform the junior flight attendants of their expectations, goals and service flows based on their own decisions. They were only informing, but not asking for opinions. In addition, they believed rules would result from efficiency so they gave lots of rules to the junior flight attendants.

One important goal of leadership communication is to create a workplace community to engage the human capital in a company (Mai & Akerson, 2003). Yet the communication way of informing inflight leaders failed to achieve the desired goal of leadership communication. Some interviewees commented that they felt speechless while working with informing inflight leaders, probably because these leaders did not engage the juniors in the workplace community. It was also found that the informing inflight leaders had made some interviewees felt distant and upset. Such emotional effect can be explained by the 'power distance' dimension under Hofstede's (1984) model of culture. According to the interviewees, these inflight leaders enjoyed having powers to make decisions and control the juniors. Such preference made the interviewees felt there were large distance, strong hierarchy and seniority between themselves. The interviewees' feelings of distance with their leaders were even stronger due to cultural differences. People tend to react differently to the others with same or different cultures (Mohan et al., 2008). Some interviewees especially highlighted that the issue of language barriers in which they felt being ignored.

Although the working rules or instructions are essential tools to achieve the inflight leaders' desired goals, managerial practices (e.g. giving orders, setting rules) may also cause counter effects on the junior flight attendants' work emotions (Güven, 2013). Some interviewees said when they worked with these inflight leaders, they were quite nervous because the leaders were very strict about the instructions and rules. The juniors would feel depressed and drained because they had to follow all instructions and there was no available adjustment.

Besides, the interviewees mentioned these inflight leaders would rate their performance right after the flights, by seeing how much they followed the instructions. These leaders would also motivate the junior flight attendants to perform well during the flights, in order to receive a good rating. In fact, high level of motivation among employees is a contributing factor towards organizational or team success (Honore, 2009; Sehkaran & Sevcikova, 2011). However, it was told by the interviewees that the informing inflight leaders' motivating methods were unwelcomed and disappointing. Probably because of the unfairness, it was found that the interviewees were disappointed regarding their inflight leaders' motivation by using 'performance-rating' system.

Authoritarian inflight leaders would not consult junior flight attendants at all while making decisions. Compared to informing inflight leaders, authoritarian inflight leaders seemed more extreme, in regards to the acceptance of opinions from the junior flight attendants. They also did not like anyone trying to change or alter their plans.

It was found that the interviewees were not impressed by the authoritarian inflight leaders' body languages. Body languages involve facial expression and eye contact (Loi et al., 2013). Facial expression reflects the emotion of an individual and influences the impressions of the receivers (Ekman, 1993). Flight attendants' facial expressions indeed not

only present a professional identity to the passengers (Trichas & Schyns, 2012), but also build up a pleasant image to their colleagues. Yet some interviewees commented that the authoritarian inflight leaders' facial expressions were not friendly, which made them feel confused if they have done something wrong or not. Some interviewees also felt panic and concern for the acceptance of their working performance when they worked with the authoritarian inflight leaders, primarily because these inflight leaders were lacked of smile. This led the juniors to feel scared and they did not know what their leaders really thought about themselves.

It was also found that the eye contacts of the authoritarian inflight leaders would cause emotional effects on the Although the working rules or instructions are essential tools to achieve the inflight leaders' desired goals, managerial practices (e.g. giving orders, setting rules) may also cause counter effects on the junior flight attendants' work emotions (Güven, 2013). Some interviewees said when they worked with these inflight leaders, they were quite nervous because the leaders were very strict about the instructions and rules. The juniors would feel depressed and drained because they had to follow all instructions and there was no available adjustment.

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It was also found that the eye contacts of the authoritarian inflight leaders would cause emotional effects on the quality management, (Ugboro & Obeng, 2000). Seeing that the consulting inflight leaders authorize a good level of work empowerment, it has been shown that the emotions of the junior flight attendants were maintained in a considerable level. It is highly recommended that the other inflight leaders adopt such tactics, in order to achieve good customer satisfaction in final.

## CONCLUSIONS

It has been shown that different inflight leaders' leadership styles can cause certain effects on the junior flight attendants' emotions. Although the consulting inflight leaders seem doing better than the other two types in maintaining their followers' emotions, it does not mean that the informing and authoritarian inflight leaders are lack of effective leadership skills and talents. The findings of the study did not try to support the consulting and challenge the informing and authoritarian inflight leaders, but more importantly, that brought out a key element of managing human capitals in the workplaces, which is communication. It is highly recommended that the airline management to review the communication atmosphere in the inflight workplaces. A complete communication should consist of a communicator, the encoding process, the message, the decoding process, a receiver, and final, the platform of providing feedback (DuBrin, 1987). The emotional problems of junior flight attendants most likely start with the imperfect encoding process. The better ways and behaviors the inflight leaders encode their decisions, the lower chance the junior flight attendants suffer from negative emotional matters while decoding their leaders' decisions.

Airline management should take the responsibilities to find ways to create or renovate a peaceful and respectful inflight workplace relationship between the leaders and juniors. This is because the quality of work relationship is closely linked to the long-term operational effectiveness and success (Doherty & Guyler, 2008). Two-way communication is extremely needed for building up good quality of work relationship. Respectful communication with colleagues can help to remove erroneous perceptions and misunderstandings that had impeded progress until that point (Schuttler & Burdick, 2010). An effective tool, perhaps a survey feedback program, is needed not only for the inflight leaders to appraise the junior flight attendants' performance, but also for the junior flight attendants to voice out their feelings and emotions regarding their inflight leaders. The inflight leaders should also well understand their leadership styles can cause their junior flight attendants feeling uncomfortable. Although it is a tradition that the leaders are expected to enjoy benefits from their powers and decision-making authorities (Highhouse et al., 2014), they need to maintain a balance and ensure the communication along the team is qualified. Otherwise, communication will lead to many obstacles at work (Colky et al., 2002).

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